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ABSTRACT

A study of teachers' perceptions concerning intellectual freedom and book selection and use in the elementary school is described in this paper. A questionnaire was sent to a random sample of 452 public elementary school classroom teachers in Minnesota. Surveys were completed by teachers for a response rate of 83%. Results indicated that: (1) 20% of the teachers never participated in selection of books for the school library; (2) 59% of the respondents taught at schools that had no written policy for book selection; (3) 83% of the teachers used trade books in the classroom; (4) 72% of the teachers read aloud to their classes daily; (5) 70% of the teachers would alter the text of an award-winning book if it contained language that might be offensive; (6) 60% of the teachers would not purchase for their classrooms favorably reviewed books that might be risky because of subject matter; (7) 74% of the teachers agreed with the practice of rewriting selections from children's books to satisfy reading difficulty demands; (8) 76% of the teachers strongly agreed or agreed that elementary school students should have First Amendment rights; (9) 3.4% of the teachers had at least one objection to trade books in the teacher's classroom; and (10) most of the teachers read children's books, and three out of four read reviews of new children's books. Findings suggest that information about challenges to books, as well as information about professional standards for dealing with challenges, must be given to teachers. (Seven tables of data are included.) (RS)

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# Teachers' Attitudes about Intellectual Freedom and Books in the Elementary School

Kathie Krieger Cerra

Increase in censorship in the public schools within the last three decades has been substantial. Jenkinson (1979) reports the rise of more than 200 organizations in the United States that want to change the public school. Burress (1989) gives research-based and anecdotal evidence which documents the rise in censorship in the public schools from 1950-1985. The Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom, a publication of the American Library Association, is not without material for its bimonthly report of published censorship incidents in the schools.

Concomitant with the rise in attempts at censorship in the schools is the recent and welcome trend toward greater use of literature in the elementary school classroom. A study by Eldredge and Butterfield (1986) provides research evidence for using literature to teach reading. Publications which advocate use of trade books in the whole language movement (e.g.Cullinan, 1987) appear with increasing frequency. Thus, at a time of increasing incidence of censorship and challenges to intellectual freedom and books, there is also a trend toward greater use of literature in the classroom in the form of trade books.

Because of the convergence of these two trends, it is a critical time to ask the question that is posed by this study. What are teachers' perceptions concerning book selection and use and intellectual freedom in the elementary school?

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**Assumptions**

An assumption of this study is that education in a democracy must be democratic. The developing child tastes the fruit of free inquiry through exploration of a variety of well-written resources in children's literature. Access to a diversity of resources encourages the child reader to respond to what he reads and to begin to develop facility in critical reading and critical thinking. In a democratic society, citizens who have learned to think critically can make informed choices as voters.

Professional organizations for teachers, notably the National Council of Teachers of English, support the right to read and the intellectual freedom of students in the schools (Burress and Jenkinson, 1982). Statements by the American Library Association offer support in matters of freedom of access to information (American Library Association, 1989, pp. 76-77). It is assumed that teachers' attitudes in support of intellectual freedom would be reflected in their choices of materials and in their practices involving children and books.

## METHODS

A questionnaire was sent to a random sample of public elementary school classroom teachers, teaching in grades one through six, in the state of Minnesota. The sample of 452 teachers represented 3% of the total population of approximately 15,000 elementary classroom teachers in the state.

The questionnaire was developed in order to gather information about teachers' views and practices concerning book selection and use and intellectual freedom in the schools. A range of topics were covered, and this article draws upon some of the most interesting findings concerning use and selection of trade books, book selection and reevaluation policies, belief in First Amendment

rights for elementary school children, challenges to books, and teachers' reading in the field of children's books.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Description of the Sample

There were 375 survey questionnaires completed and returned, comprising about 83% of the original random sample. Urban areas comprise 15% of the returns, suburban areas comprise 36% of the returns, and rural areas comprise 49% of the returns.

Respondents teaching in the primary grades (1-3), comprise 55% of the sample, and respondents teaching in the intermediate grades (4-6) comprise 45% of the sample.

Of those responding, 97% of teachers have taken one course (44%) or more than one course (53%) in children's literature in teacher preparation programs.

With regard to preparation in the field of intellectual freedom, approximately two out of five respondents have attended a class period devoted to intellectual freedom, while three out of five have not.

Ninety-eight percent of the responding teachers indicated that their schools have a library/media center.

### Findings

*Responsibility for Tradebook Selection*

Teachers were asked to indicate how often they, as individuals, participate in selection of books for the school library. One-fifth (20%) of the responding teachers never participate in library book selection, while a similar proportion (16%) reported that they always or often participate in library book selection. Of those responding, 64% sometimes participate in library book selection.

Teachers were asked how often they select trade books for the classroom in which they teach. Of those responding, 17% always participate in selection of trade books for the classroom in which the respondent teaches, 23% often participate, and 41% sometimes participate. Approximately one in five teachers responding to the survey never participates in the selection of trade books for the classroom in which the respondent teaches.

*Written School Policies for Book Selection and Reevaluation*

Teachers were asked about their perceptions of written selection policies and written reevaluation policies for books in the school library. Of the respondents, 37% reported a written school policy for book selection, 59% of respondents reported no written policy, and 4% of respondents reported that they did not know. Similar results were found concerning a written policy for reevaluation of library books. These findings were compared with a study of Minnesota principals (Chandler, 1985). Comparison with the Chandler study concluded that significantly higher proportions of principals reported written policies than did teachers. It is possible that the written selection and reevaluation policies exist, but that teachers do not know about them.

*Extent of Use of Tradebooks*

In response to a question asking if the teacher uses trade books in the classroom, it was found that a majority (83%) use trade books. Of the respondents, 17% reported that they do not use trade books in the classroom. Respondents teaching at the primary level are more likely to use trade books in their classrooms than are respondents teaching at the intermediate level.

Another question asked about the extent of the current use of trade books in the respondent's teaching, compared with five years ago. Slightly more than

half (52%) of the teachers reported greater use of trade books in their teaching, compared with five years ago.

Teachers were asked about the extent of use of trade books in the school curriculum.compared with five years ago. It was found that 43% of teachers observe more use of trade books in the school curriculum. Slightly more than half (52%) of the teachers observe the same degree of use of trade books compared with five years ago.

*Teachers' Opinions and Practices Regarding Use of Books with Children*

The survey included a series of questions which dealt with teachers' actions concerning books and children, and their opinions regarding selecting books for children. The findings for these questions are of interest to anyone who deals with children and books, and may be of particular interest to librarians and media specialists.

When asked about how frequently they read aloud to their class, a majority (72%) of responding teachers reported that they read aloud daily, 19% read aloud weekly, but not every day, and 8% read aloud occasionally. Respondents teaching at the primary level were more likely to read aloud daily to their class than were intermediate level teachers.

The survey asked the following question: If an award-winning book which you have chosen to read aloud to your class has language which you feel might be offensive, what action would you take? Of the responding teachers, 16% indicated that they would select another book, while 14% indicated that they would read the book exactly as written. The majority of respondents (70%) indicated that they would alter the text so that it is more suitable. The distribution of respondents' choices is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

**Response to the Question: If an award-winning book you have chosen to read aloud to your class has language which you feel might be offensive, what action would you take?**

| Action | f | % |
|---|---|---|
| Select another book | 60 | 16.3 |
| Read the book exactly as it is written | 51 | 13.9 |
| Alter the text so it is more suitable | 256 | 69.8 |
| **Total** | **367** | **100.0** |

Another item of the survey asked the following question: When you are warned that a favorably reviewed book which you have read is risky because of its subject matter, what action do you take when considering purchase of the book for your classroom? Table 2 reports the responses to each of the three actions offered as choices. Of those who responded, 16% elected to purchase the book and not limit student access, and 25% indicated that they would purchase

**Table 2**

**Response to the Question: When you are warned that a favorably reviewed book which you have read is risky because of its subject matter, what action do you take when considering purchase of the book for your classroom?**

| Response | f | % |
|---|---|---|
| Purchase the book anyway, and do not limit student access | 55 | 15.8 |
| Purchase the book, but limit student access | 86 | 24.7 |
| Do not purchase the book | 207 | 59.5 |
| **Total** | **348** | **100.0** |

the book but limit student access. A majority (60%) of the responding teachers indicated that they would not purchase the book.

Another survey item asked about the particular types of children's books that the teacher would permit in the classroom. Table 3 reports responses for this item. Of the responding teachers, 55% would permit stories from the Bible

in their classrooms, equal proportions (49%) would permit stories from the Torah or stories from the Koran in their classrooms, and 96% would permit

**Table 3**
**Decisions About Types of Children's Books Teacher Would Permit in Classroom.**

| | Yes | | No | | Undecided | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type of Book | f | % | f | % | f | % |
| Stories from the Bible | 203 | 54.9 | 99 | 26.8 | 68 | 18.4 |
| Stories from the Koran | 181 | 49.2 | 89 | 24.2 | 98 | 26.6 |
| Stories from the Torah | 179 | 48.6 | 90 | 24.5 | 99 | 26.9 |
| Native American mythology | 349 | 93.8 | 9 | 2.4 | 14 | 3.8 |
| Greek myths and fables | 358 | 96.2 | 5 | 1.3 | 9 | 2.4 |

Greek myths and fables in their classrooms. It can be concluded that teachers are more likely to permit native American mythology and Greek myths and fables in the classroom than stories from the Torah, stories from the Bible, and stories from the Koran. A substantial percentage of respondents were undecided about permitting stories from the Bible (18%), stories from the Koran (27%) and stories from the Torah (27%) in their classrooms. Access to stories from each of these sources would be important for an informed understanding of current events and Middle Eastern cultures. The undecided option selected by over one-fourth of respondents raises the possibility of respondents' uncertainty concerning what the Torah and the Koran are.

Teachers were asked for their views about school library book selection with regard to certain subject matter. The question posed was as follows: Would you reject a book for inclusion in the school library on the basis of the following subject matter: religion, sex, politics, racism, sexism, other. Responses to this

item are reported in Table 4. On the basis of religion as the subject matter, about 21% of respondents would reject a book for inclusion in the school library. On the basis of sex as the subject matter, about 53% of teachers would reject a book

**Table 4**
**Subject Matter Basis Upon Which to Reject a Book for School Library.**

| | Yes | | No | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Subject Matter | f | % | f | % |
| Religion | 74 | 20.8 | 281 | 79.2 |
| Sex | 186 | 53.4 | 162 | 46.6 |
| Politics | 41 | 11.8 | 307 | 88.2 |
| Racism | 223 | 61.6 | 139 | 38.4 |
| Sexism | 209 | 58.2 | 150 | 41.8 |
| Other | 13 | | 28 | |

for inclusion in the school library. On the basis of politics, about 12% of respondents would reject a book, while on the basis of racism as the subject matter, 62% of respondents would reject a book for inclusion in the school library. On the basis of sexism as the subject matter 58% of respondents would reject a book for inclusion in the school library. Including certain subject matter within a book does not assume agreement with the subject matter itself. It can be speculated that respondents may not understand this point (Burress, 1989, p. 47).

Another item in the survey asked the following question: It is a common practice for textbooks to have excerpts from children's books. Do you agree with the practice of rewriting selections from children's books to satisfy reading difficulty demands? Agreement with the practice of rewriting selections from children's books was indicated by 74% of responding teachers. Of those responding, 26% did not agree with the practice of rewriting children's books to

satisfy reading difficulty demands. Although this practice is discouraged by authors and reviewers within the field of children's literature, about three out of four responding teachers agree with the practice of rewriting children's books to satisfy reading difficulty demands.

*Teachers' Views about First Amendment Rights for Elementary School Students*

Two items from the survey dealt with teachers' views concerning the First Amendment in the schools. One question asked if the respondent agrees or disagrees that elementary school students should have First Amendment rights. Responses are reported in Table 5, indicating that 76% of responding teachers strongly agree (19%) or agree (57%) that elementary school students should have First Amendment rights. Of those responding, 9% disagree and 2% strongly

**Table 5**
**Agreement of Teachers with First Amendment Rights for Students in Elementary School.**

| Response | f | % |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly agree | 69 | 19.0 |
| Agree | 207 | 57.0 |
| Disagree | 34 | 9.4 |
| Strongly disagree | 6 | 1.7 |
| No opinion | 47 | 12.9 |

disagree that elementary school students should have First Amendment rights. In response to this question, 13% of teachers have no opinion. This matter has been addressed by the Supreme Court in the landmark Tinker case, in which Justice Fortas wrote that neither students nor teachers shed their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate (Hentoff, 1980, p. 5).

Another question asked how the teacher would respond if invited to explain the First Amendment to a group of students in the elementary school. Results are reported in Table 6. "Decline because the topic is inappropriate in the elementary school" was the selected response in 11% of teachers. "Accept only

**Table 6**
**Response of Teachers to Invitation to Explain First Amendment to Children.**

| Response | f | % |
|---|---|---|
| Decline because topic is inappropriate in elementary school | 37 | 10.8 |
| Accept if audience is age ten or older | 77 | 22.4 |
| Accept for any age level | 229 | 66.8 |
| **Total** | **343** | **100.0** |

if the audience is the age of ten or older" was the choice of 22% of the respondents. "Accept for any age level" was the choice of 67% of respondents.

Findings for the questions concerning the First Amendment indicate that a majority of teachers agree that elementary school students should have First Amendment rights, and a majority of teachers are willing to explain the First Amendment to elementary school students of any age.

*Challenges to Books*

Teachers were asked questions about the sources and objects of challenges to the suitability of books in the teacher's classroom and school. One item asked how many objections there have been to trade books in the teacher's classroom during the 1988-89 (then current) school year. Of those teachers responding, 3.4% reported at least one objection to trade books in the teacher's classroom.

Another question asked about the sources of challenges to the suitability of trade books in the teacher's classroom. Respondents were asked if the suitability of trade books in their classroom was challenged by a teacher, librarian, principal, parent, non-parent community group, or religious group. The total number of challenges reported was 38. The two highest sources of challenges were teachers (37%) and parents (26%). Equal levels of challenges (13%) were reported to have originated from librarians and from principals . Non-parent community resident and religious group each accounted for the lowest (5%) sources of challenges. This finding is consistent with other studies which indicate that challenges often originate with school personnel. Comparison with Chandler's (1985) study of Minnesota principals revealed that a higher percentage of principals reported challenges, suggesting that principals are more aware of challenges to books than are teachers.

Teachers were asked to list the titles of trade books which have been challenged in the respondent's school during the 1988-89 school year. Nineteen of the responding teachers, or 5% of the total sample, replied with a list of one or more titles which have been challenged in the elementary school during the 1988-89 school year. Table 7 lists the titles and authors of challenged books. Along with the titles named were several descriptive phrases indicating challenges to books with certain content, such as "books on witches", "book with a romance story," "book covering topic of divorce," and "book questioned because of language used." Although it is difficult to make generalizations about the books which were reported to be the focus of objections, the contents of books which were challenged are similar to those which are the source of objections to books for adolescents.

**Table 7**
**Books Reported Challenged in 1988-89**

| Title | Author |
|---|---|
| *Why the Sun and the Moon Live in the Sky* | Elphinstone Dayrell |
| *Bridge to Terabithia* | Katherine Paterson |
| *Grandpa's Ghost Stories* | James Flora |
| *Liza Lou and the Yeller Belly Swamp* | Mercer Mayer |
| *Be Nice to Josephine* | Betty F. Horvath |
| *Pippi in the South Seas* | Astrid Lindgren |
| *How You Were Born* | Joanna Cole |
| *The Right to Bear Arms* | Geraldine and Howard Woods |
| *The Upstairs Room* | Johanna Reiss |
| *The Long Secret* | Louise Fitzhugh |
| *Are You There God, It's Me Margaret?* | Judy Blume |
| *The One in the Middle is the Green Kangaroo* | Judy Blume |
| *Deenie* | Judy Blume |
| *Where the Sidewalk Ends* | Shel Silverstein |
| *Devil's Donkey* | Bill Brittain |
| *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* | Mildred Taylor |
| *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* | Elizabeth George Speare |
| *The Snowy Day* | Ezra Jack Keats |
| *More Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* | Alvin Schwartz |
| *And Leffe was Instead of a Dad* | Thorvall |
| *Little Fellow* | Winston |

*Teachers' Current Reading in the Field of Children's Books*

A survey item asked if the teacher reads children's books and if the teacher reads reviews of children's books. It was found that while most teachers read children's books, three out of four read reviews of new children's books.

Another question asked how often teachers read reviews of children's books in these publications: Reading Teacher, Horn Book, School Library

Journal, and special children's book editions of major newspapers. The resource most relied upon for reviews of new children's books is special children's book editions of major newspapers. The journal most often read by teachers as a source of reviews of new children's books is Reading Teacher. Relatively few teachers read Horn Book Magazine, a publication devoted exclusively to children's books.

## EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The high rate of returned, completed questionnaires (83%) for this study suggests that the issues addressed by the survey are ones that teachers care about. Many of the respondents added written comments. One teacher said that it was interesting to complete such a survey and asked for the researcher's views about the topics addressed. Another respondent wrote an account of the difficulties which occurred after a parent challenged a book that the teacher had selected to read aloud to the class.

In response to the finding that there is increased use of trade books in the elementary classroom, the need for increased involvement of the elementary school teacher in the selection of trade books for the elementary school classroom becomes clear. The elementary teacher is in a unique position to influence the connection between children and books. That 72% of the teachers in the study reported reading to their classes daily attests to one aspect of the essential role that teachers play. Clearly, teachers require greater responsibility for book selection because of their increasingly important role in promoting children's involvement with children's literature in the classroom. Librarians and teachers can work together in this endeavor, to the greater benefit of children in the schools.

The finding that teachers may be less aware of selection policies than are principals suggests that teachers would benefit from greater access to information about written book selection and reevaluation policies in the schools. Librarians and principals can make certain that teachers are aware of those policies which support school staff in ensuring children's freedom to read.

Teachers' informed choices in selecting books are essential for the best interaction between teacher, children, and books. Informed choices are educated choices, and to that end, education of preservice and inservice teachers must involve a critical approach to children's literature which instructs in the process of assessing the literary and artistic quality of trade books for children.

This study found that three out of four teachers agree with the practice of changing the literary piece in order to reduce the readability level of a passage. Artistic integrity of the literature is destroyed when ease of reading difficulty takes precedence over the literary piece. Findings would imply that preservice and inservice preparation in judging literary and artistic quality in children's books should be balanced with information about readability of materials.

One who effectively selects books for children reads reviews of new children's books, and the new books themselves, in order to remain current in the field. Elementary school librarians and administrators can facilitate teachers' current reading of well-written reviews of new books by subscribing to reputable journals and making those publications accessible to teachers in the schools.

Findings about teachers' opinions and practices regarding use of books with children would imply that elementary classroom teachers would benefit from knowledge about professional guidelines for book selection and use. Three-quarters of the respondents indicated belief in First Amendment rights for elementary school children. Teachers need access to resources which show them how to implement, through actions, the First Amendment rights which they

espouse. Instruction in intellectual freedom, and in the guidelines for academic freedom proposed by the National Council of Teachers of English and the American Library Association, is essential as a basis for teachers' actions involving children and books.

Findings of the study would suggest that teachers are less aware of challenges to books in their schools than are principals. As a safeguard to intellectual freedom, information about challenges to books, as well as information about professional standards for dealing with challenges, must be given to teachers. Librarians and principals would be wise to inform teachers of challenges and to explain professional standards for dealing with them.

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